

Pratfalls and Politics

This is not a good time for political satire—not because of official repression, but because the possibility of satire has been undercut by the self-satire of its potential objects. When he tried to satirize President Nixon, Gore Vidal had no recourse but to use the actual words of Mr. Nixon himself. When E. Howard Hunt Jr. pleads guilty to every count in the Watergate indictment and then tells reporters with the dignity of a Roman senator that he broke all those laws "in the best interest of my country," he is doing exactly what John Gay did in "The Beggars' Opera" when he showed footpads behaving with all the gravity of Prime Ministers.

A major reason for the new self-parody is the omnipresence of the media, especially TV and one thing the media has helped to kill is the idea of political cabaret. The American Place Theatre has finally opened its long-promised cabaret, The Sub Plot, and its new show, "What's a Nice Country Like You Doing in a State Like This?" expresses the self-contradictions of the classic American liberal: "I'm a radical conservative with anarchistic leanings/Who supports the revolution to preserve the status quo."

But the only effective modern political satire has come neither from the liberal center nor from the official left, but from ineffable mutations like the early Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce, full of a hilarious bitter paranoia that was a catharsis for the nagging frustrations of

their audiences. Today an almost lone oasis of political satire is the work of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, founded in 1959, when San Francisco was the Athens of the counterculture.

The troupe lives together as a collective, charges no admission, receives no subsidies. What makes it effective is its absolute dedication, lack of self-righteousness and theatrical brilliance. "The Dragon Lady's Revenge," which the troupe has brought to New York, is a kind of dramatization of Alfred McCoy's book, "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia." A savagely partisan show in its depiction of nefarious American politicians and military men and South Vietnamese officials, it also transcends partisanship in its skewering assault on archetypal greed and villainy.

Clowns: The Mime Troupe are spiritual descendants of the wandering entertainers—jugglers, clowns, buffoons—who since ancient times have been a counter-theater to the official one. With fantastic speed and hair-trigger timing they compose a symphony of pratfalls, pantomime and sharp, lean dialogue. The actors perform different roles, make lightning costume changes, play instruments in the effective little band. Their spirit and skills—Michael Christensen as a CIA agent and Andrea Snow as the Madame Nhu-like Dragon Lady—are epitomized by Sharon Lockwood. She plays General Rong Q, the head of state, in a non-stop St. Vitus's dance of perfectly controlled tics and twitches that becomes a Chaplinesque portrait of self-satisfied corruption.

—J. K.